



Middle Grades Spotlight

A Newsletter for California's Middle Grades Educator

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Fall 2003

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Writing—the art of communicating thoughts to the mind—is the great invention of the world....Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions.

Abraham Lincoln

A Message from the Superintendent

Welcome to the fall edition of the *Middle Grades Spotlight*. This issue focuses on writing and its importance for our students. Writing enhances students' organizational, thinking, and reading abilities, and it is an essential, life-long skill. Helping our students to become good writers is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

I am pleased that California's eighth grade students made significant gains on the Writing Assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2002. However, while our scores are moving in the right direction, our students' achievement is still below where we want it to be. The results underscore the need for a much stronger statewide focus on writing.

We can learn much from these results. Not surprisingly, students who have numerous opportunities to write and revise their writing regularly outperform those who only have sporadic exposure to writing.

California's content standards in writing for grades six through eight are rigorous and require that English teachers instruct and engage students frequently in writing. In addition, for students to become truly proficient and meet these standards, writing must become an essential component across the curriculum. It is not the sole responsibility of the English teacher but a collaborative effort for teachers of all subject areas.

Thank you for the steady gains we have been making in California to improve academic performance. I urge you to continue to build on your writing programs to help prepare our students for the future.

Best wishes,

JACK O'CONNELL

Taking Center Stage (TCS)

Every middle grades teacher should become proficient in teaching reading and writing so that the students can develop basic skills in literacy. Learning strategies designed to develop academic literacy should include ensuring that students understand the significance of grade-level content and performance standards in each subject area.

Excerpt taken from *TCS*, page 160.



WRITE! WRITE!! WRITE!!!

What the Nation's Report Card Says to California's Middle Grades Teachers About Writing

NAEP Data Illustrates the Reading-Writing Connection

Most educators today agree that integrating reading and writing benefits the development of literacy. Numerous studies have shown that reading development does not take place in isolation; children develop simultaneously as readers, listeners, speakers, and writers.

Students in the NAEP 1998 Reading Assessment were asked how frequently in school they were required to write long answers to questions on tests or assignments that involved reading. Students who said they wrote long answers on a weekly basis had higher scores than those who said they never or hardly ever did so.

Excerpts from NAEP's "Profiles of the National Writing Project: Improving Writing and Learning in the Nation's Schools" brochure, p. 27.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is sometimes called "The Nation's Report Card." NAEP is administered every four years by the National Center for Education Statistics, which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, to gauge the progress of states in crucial areas of achievement in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. In 2002, a statistical sample of California's middle schools participated in the NAEP Reading and Writing Assessments. National results by state were released in the summer of 2003.

Results

The 2002 NAEP Writing Assessment results showed gains for eighth graders at both the national and the state levels. From 1998 to 2002 California grew three scale score points in writing, while the nation grew four. The percent of California's eighth graders writing at the proficient level or above also grew slightly from 20 percent to 23 percent. Tables 1 and 2 display the data more fully.

Table 1: NAEP Writing Assessment – 8th Grade Scale Scores in 1998 and 2002

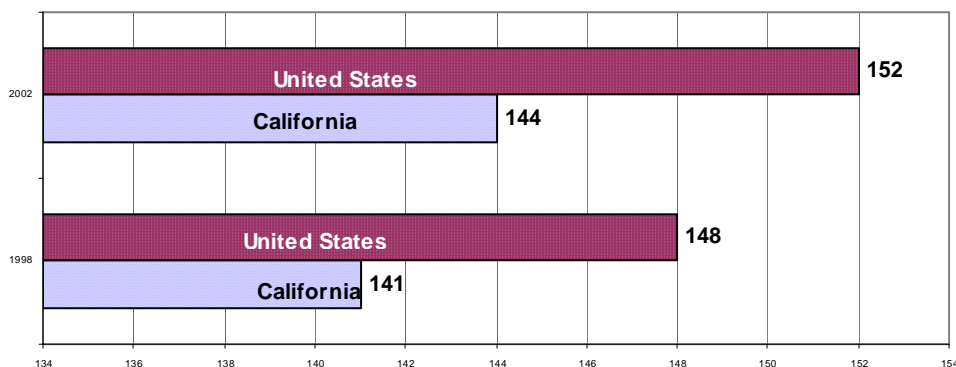


Table 2: Percentage of California's 8th grade students scoring at each NAEP Performance Level in Writing

| | Below Basic | Basic | Proficient | Advanced |
|------|-------------|-------|------------|----------|
| 2002 | 22% | 55% | 22% | 1% |
| 1998 | 24% | 56% | 19% | 1% |

Figure 1: NAEP Scale Scores and Levels of Performance

| Grade 8 | Writing Scale | Narrative: President for a Day—Write a story about being president for a day. | Informative: Save a Book—Discuss one book to save for future generations. | Persuasive: School Schedule—Debate changing hours of the school day. |
|---|---------------|---|---|--|
| | 300 | | | |
| | 290 | | | |
| | 280 | | | |
| | 270 | | | |
| | 260 | | | |
| | 250 | | | |
| Advanced | 240 | | 241 Save a Book—Excellent | 241 School Schedule—Excellent |
| 224 | 230 | 232 President for a Day—Excellent | | |
| <i>This level signifies superior performance</i> | 220 | | 215 Save a Book—Skillful or better | |
| | 210 | | | |
| | 200 | 201 President for a Day—Skillful or better | | 205 School Schedule—Skillful or better |
| | 190 | | | |
| Proficient | 180 | | | |
| 173 | 170 | | | |
| <i>This level represents solid academic performance</i> | 160 | 158 President for a Day—Sufficient or better | 162 Save a Book—Sufficient or better | 159 School Schedule—Sufficient or better |
| | 150 | | | |
| | 140 | | | |
| Basic | 130 | | | 119 School Schedule—Uneven or better |
| 114 | 120 | | 117 Save a Book—Uneven or better | |
| <i>This level denotes partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills.</i> | 110 | 110 President for a Day—Uneven or better | | |
| | 100 | | | |
| | 90 | | | |
| | 80 | | 85 Save a Book—Insufficient or better | 93 School Schedule—Insufficient or better |
| | 70 | | | |
| | 60 | 66 President for a Day—Insufficient or better | | |
| | 50 | | | |

■ Where California's eighth grade students scored on the 2002 NAEP Writing Assessment

Writing Sample Prompts from the 2002 NAEP

Your school board is studying ways to reduce vandalism (destruction of property) at your school. You have been appointed as a student advisor to write a report to the school board about the problem of vandalism and how to solve it.

To help you get started, your school board has given you the chart in envelope "M," which provides information about the extent of vandalism in your school. The school board wants you to discuss ways to prevent some of the different types of vandalism, which include graffiti; destroying furniture; breaking windows; and damaging trees, athletic fields, and fences.

In your report, describe the extent of vandalism in your school and discuss what you think are the main reasons for vandalism. Then present the board with a plan for how to stop vandalism in your school. Be specific so that the board can use your suggestions to solve the problem of vandalism.

Excerpts and more examples can be found at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>

What Students Were Asked to Write About

For the 2002 Writing Assessment, NAEP assessed three types of writing at the eighth grade:

- **Narrative writing** involves the production of stories or personal essays. The narrative topics in the 2002 Writing Assessment encouraged writers to use their creativity and powers of observation to develop stories that capture a reader's imagination.
- **Informative writing** communicates information to the reader to share knowledge or to convey messages, instructions, and ideas. The informative topics in the 2002 Writing Assessment required students to write on specified subjects in a variety of formats, such as reports, reviews, and letters.
- **Persuasive writing** seeks to influence the reader to take some action or bring about change. It may contain factual information such as reasons, examples, or comparisons; however, its main purpose is not to inform, but to persuade. The persuasive topics in the 2002 Writing Assessment asked students to write letters to friends, newspaper editors, or prospective employers, as well as to refute arguments or take sides in a debate.

Student Responses to NAEP

An examination of the student response information gives important information about classroom and school practices that are associated with higher writing achievement. As a part of the NAEP assessment process, California's eighth grade students were asked about the classroom practices their teachers used. Table 3 shows what classroom and school practices were associated with NAEP scale scores.

**Table 3: 8th Grade Student Survey Responses and NAEP Scale Scores
2002 NAEP Writing Assessment - California**

A. Curriculum Practices: Multiple Drafts and Making Improvements

| Student Questions Asked | 2002 NAEP Scale Score in Writing | | |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| | Always | Sometimes | Seldom / Never |
| <i>“When you write, how often does your teacher ask you to write more than one draft of a paper?”</i> | 155 * ↑ | 140 | 137 * |
| <i>“When you write a paper or report for school, how often do you make changes to your paper to fix mistakes and improve your paper?”</i> | 150 * | 142 | 128 * |

B. Curriculum Practices: Using Writing Processes

| Student Questions Asked | 2002 NAEP Scale Score in Writing | | |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| | Always | Sometimes | Seldom / Never |
| <i>“How often does your class engage in the stages of the writing process?”</i> | 152 * ↔ | 140* | --- (insufficient response) |
| <i>“When you write a paper or report for school this year, how often do you organize your paper before you write (for example, make an outline, draw a chart, etc.)?”</i> | 150 * | 141 * | 142 * |
| <i>“During the last month, how many times in your classes have you engaged in a pre-writing activity?”</i> | 2+ Times | Once | None |
| | 155 * ↑ | 148 | 129 * |

Note: It is important to note that all of the differences presented in Table 3 were statistically significant at the $p > .05$ level or greater.

* Indicates that differences between high vs. low scores are statistically significant

↑ Indicates a scale score above the national average

↔ Indicates a scale score that equals the national average

C. Curriculum Practices: Emphasis on Organization and Analysis

| Student Questions Asked | 2002 NAEP Scale Score in Writing | | |
|---|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | "Always" | "Sometimes" | "Seldom" / "Never" |
| <i>"How frequently do you do a writing assignment that asks you to analyze or interpret something?"</i> | 152 * ↔ | 143 | 123 * |
| <i>"When your teacher grades your writing, how important is the way your paper is organized?"</i> | "Very important" * | "Moderately important" | "Not very important" * |
| | 152 * ↔ | 131 | 114 * |

D. Curriculum Practices: Writing Across Curriculum / Frequent Practice

| Student Questions Asked | 2002 NAEP Scale Score in Writing | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | "A lot" | "Some" | "Little or no" | |
| <i>"What evidence was provided of writing across the curriculum at the school?"</i> [A re-analysis of four student response variables] | 147 * | 146 | 116 * | |
| <i>"For your non-English / language arts classes, how often do you write at least a paragraph?"</i> | "At least once a week" * | "Once/twice a month" | "A few times a year" | "Never" / "Seldom" * |
| | 150 * | 140 | 113 * | 120 |

E. Curriculum Practices: Encouraging Creative Ideas

| Student Question Asked | 2002 NAEP Scale Score in Writing | | |
|--|----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| | "Very important" | "Moderately important" | "Not very important" |
| <i>"When your teacher grades your writing, how important is the quality and creativity of your ideas?"</i> | 152 * ↔ | 141 | 125 * |

Note: It is important to note that all of the differences presented in Table 3 were statistically significant at the $p > .05$ level or greater.

* Indicates that differences between high vs. low scores are statistically significant

↑ Indicates a scale score above the national average

↔ Indicates a scale score that equals the national average

Conclusions


So, what can California's middle grade teachers do to increase student achievement in writing? The simple answer is for students to write, re-write, and write again. Those California teachers who require (students say "always") more than one draft have higher student achievement. Fixing mistakes and frequent rewriting are associated with higher quality writing.

Likewise, teachers who frequently (two to three times a month) use writing assignments that call for analysis and interpretation are associated with higher student achievement. Organization is also an important element in the success of student writing. Teachers who grade on organization and who allow opportunities to demonstrate organizational skills have students with increased writing skills. Furthermore, when teachers encourage creative ideas, students seem to write better.

In recent years, some California classrooms have de-emphasized writing. Schools that were judged to have a low level of writing across the curriculum had a lower level of writing achievement. When students reported that they wrote a paragraph only "a few times a year" or "seldom/never," they had significantly lower NAEP writing scores.

Using the writing process, including the opportunity to engage in pre-writing activities, is beneficial to middle grade students. As the NAEP results unmistakably show, teachers who continue to rigorously require multiple drafts and who continue to teach the processes of writing produce students who are more confident and capable writers—even under the conditions of a standardized national writing assessment.

NAEP Web site: <<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>>. All the data reported in this article came from the NAEP Web site.



Stanford Middle School
Long Beach Unified School District
Long Beach, CA
Donald Keller, Principal

~One of California's 2002 Distinguished Schools~

"Open ended writing assessments give us great feedback on where our students are in meeting the standards. They are used as benchmarks to help propel our curriculum." Greg Tate, English teacher

Open Ended Writing (OEW)
Stanford Middle School uses regularly scheduled OEW to assess student achievement in English, math, science and history. Students are given three formal writing prompts annually in each content area to demonstrate both their writing proficiency and their content knowledge. These assessments are scored at the school level (for sixth and eighth graders) and at the district level (for seventh graders). After each assessment has been scored, teacher teams meet and review students' work in order to identify areas of strength and to set goals for improvement.

District Writing Requirements
All students must achieve at the "Partial Proficiency" level or above on the Long Beach Unified School District Direct Writing Assessment before promoting to ninth grade.

2003 SCHOOL PROFILE:

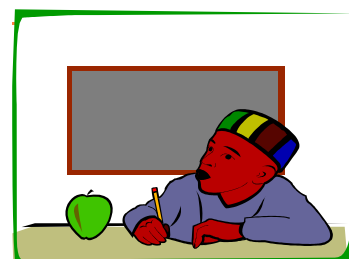
- Los Angeles County
- 1,308 students (6% mobility)
- 46% White
- 27% Hispanic
- 14% African American
- 10% Asian
- 13% English learners
- 36% Free / reduced meals
- 789 API (up +25 points)

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges' Commitment to Writing

"Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many."

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts the power of language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Yet, although many models of effective writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Disciplines such as mathematics, history, science, and foreign language properly deserve the attention they receive. This Commission holds no brief for the idea that writing can be improved while substance is ignored. Still, writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. And writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom.

Excerpts from the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*.





Funding for Educational Technology

Research Findings

Research has shown that effective integration of technology into the curriculum can be used as a catalyst for change in the learning environment. Technology has been positively linked to increasing student motivation, learner engagement, communication/collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Sandholtz et al., 1997; Ringstaff & Kelley, 2002). Student writing has particularly benefited from the use of technology. In a report by Rockman, et al (1997), students who participated in a technology pilot project wrote more drafts, spent more time on content rather than mechanics and presentation, and accepted teachers' comments and advice for improvement more readily.

Improvements in writing have been seen in other projects (Rockman & Sloan, 1995) where computers were generally available at home and in school. These gains were usually associated with changes in timely teacher feedback and improved facilities for students to revise their work.

Technology Grants for Schools Serving Students, Grades 4-8

One way to fund educational technology is through grants disseminated by the Education Technology Office in the California Department of Education (CDE). Through the Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) program, the CDE awards these federally funded grants to school districts (or a consortium of districts), county offices of education, and direct-funded charter schools that meet certain criteria. Half of the funding is apportioned for competitive grant awards and the other half for formula grant awards. The application deadline for the first round of funding was May 14, 2003, and 60 local educational agencies and 197 school sites that served students in grades four through eight benefited. The formula grants awarded during the first round of funding went to 680 districts. The competitive grants were based on approximately \$300 per student at funded sites, and the formula grants were based on district Title I entitlement.

There is now another opportunity to receive funding through the EETT program. **The Request for Applications for a second round of funding was posted in early November, and applications will be due January 14, 2004.** Funds received through the program may be spent on hardware, software (must be on the California Learning Resource Network reviewed listing, with some exceptions), infrastructure, and costs related to the implementation of educational technology. A minimum of 25 percent must be spent on high quality professional development that is based on a review of relevant research. As part of the eligibility requirements, both grants require districts to have a current, approved technology plan that meets EETT criteria.

Information about EETT grants and a list of eligible districts for the formula grant are available at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/edtech/eett/>. Questions about either grant may be directed to the Education Technology Office at (916) 323-5715. By Joyce Hinkson, Education Technology Office, CDE.

Technology and the Teaching of Writing:...computers have introduced entirely new ways of generating, organizing, and editing text. Computers help shorten the work of composing and revising. The tedious task of retyping entire pages simply to move a sentence is a thing of the past. Technology also opens new opportunities for helping children learn the rudiments of grammar and composition, while encouraging them to share their work with one another....It is apparent that many of today's young people...are comfortable with these new technologies and are eager to use them.

Excerpt from the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*.

Resources & News

- **The Nation's Report Card**

The National Center for Education Statistics maintains a Web site that provides quick access to a wide-range of resources for those who use NAEP data. Included on the Web site are reports on student performance in any NAEP subject areas and questions from NAEP assessments, complete with student performance data, scoring guides, and sample writing prompts and student answers.

[<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/)

- **Writing Assessment Framework**

The National Assessment Governing Board, U.S. Department of Education, contracted for the development of the *Writing Framework and Specifications for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress*. The framework is available online. [<http://www.nagb.org/cellc.html>](http://www.nagb.org/cellc.html)

- **California Writing Project**

The California Writing Project (CWP) is a network of 18 sites housed on college and university campuses statewide. Every year, over 30,000 teachers at all grade levels, and often in disciplines other than English, participate in CWP programs to improve student writing and learning by improving their teaching of writing. [<http://csmp.ucop.edu/cwp/>](http://csmp.ucop.edu/cwp/)

- **California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) Writing Guide**

Developed as a reference guide for teachers and students, the "Preparing for the Writing Test" handbook assists them in producing the specific genres or text structures delineated in the standards and assessed during the CAHSEE. Middle school teachers are encouraged to utilize these materials in seventh and eighth grade. Each type of writing is introduced along with a "How to Write" section, sample topics, a scoring guide, and sample lessons. Published by the Sacramento County Office of Education; cost is \$5.00. Contact Lynn Milan at (916) 228-2464 or by e-mail at [<lmilan@scoe.net>](mailto:lmilan@scoe.net).

- **The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges**

In an effort to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing, the College Board established the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. The Commission's report, *The Neglected "R": The Need For a Writing Revolution*, outlines the issues and provides recommendations about what will be required to create a writing revolution with suggestions on how to go about launching it. [<http://www.writingcommission.org/report.html>](http://www.writingcommission.org/report.html)

- **This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents**

The National Middle School Association just announced the release of its new position paper, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. This landmark document provides a vision for successful middle schools and delineates 14 characteristics that, when present over time, lead to higher levels of student achievement. [<http://www.nmsa.org/>](http://www.nmsa.org/)

- **Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas**

A collection of resources on adolescent literacy in the content areas is available from the Knowledge Loom Web site developed by the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University. [<www.knowledgeloom.org/adlit/index.jsp>](http://www.knowledgeloom.org/adlit/index.jsp)

- **California State Gear Up**

A federally funded, state administered program, *Gear Up* is designed to stimulate middle school students' interest in college, awareness of college entrance requirements, and available financial assistance. <<http://www.castategearup.org/partners.asp>>

- **Vantage Learning's "My Access!" Program**

In an effort to improve student writing, the Association of California School Administration (ACSA) has joined forces with Vantage Learning as part of the ACSA Corporate Affiliate Program. Vantage's online software program instantly scores student essays and provides immediate feedback for the student as well as the teacher. <<http://www.vantagelearning.com/>>



Looking Ahead...

Year 2004

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| January 16-18 | California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) Technology Conference – <i>The Power of Three: Teaching, Learning and Technology</i> Monterey, CA < http://www.clms.net/conferences/index.htm > |
| February 5-6 | CA Middle Grades Partnership Network (CMGPN) Quarterly Meeting California Department of Education 1430 N Street Sacramento, California 95814 Contact Camille Smith at casmith@cde.ca.gov |
| March 11 | CA Middle Grades Partnership Network (CMGPN) Principal and Superintendent Appreciation Event Marriott Hotel, San Jose, California Contact Jim Miller at < JMiller@cde.ca.gov > |
| March 12-14 | California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) 2004 Annual Conference – <i>Middle Level Education: Piecing It Together</i> Convention Center, San Jose, California < http://www.clms.net/conferences/index.htm > |
| April 20-21 | On the Right Track 2 Symposium WestEd and the California Department of Education The Westin-Los Angeles Airport, Los Angeles, California Contact Linda Slayton at < lslayton@cde.ca.gov > or (916) 319-0833 |

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